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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PBTS](#) [OFDP](#) [OVIP](#) [BL](#) [AR](#) [CO](#) [BR](#)
SUBJECT: DIALOGUE: MUCH ADO ABOUT INTERNATIONAL VOICES

REF: A. LA PAZ 751

[1](#)B. LA PAZ 735

Classified By: EcoPol Chief Mike Hammer for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. OAS Political Secretary Dante Caputo seemed resigned to the fact that the opposition is holding firm to a May 4 date for an autonomy referendum in Santa Cruz Department (state) and will not sacrifice it as a means to expedite a new round of negotiations with the government. Caputo met April 14 and 15 with the four opposition department prefects (governors) planning autonomy referendums in May and June and with Bolivian President Evo Morales. Caputo and the prefects affirmed any dialogue would be a long-term affair. Vice President Alvaro Garcia Linera and other government officials argued dialogue needed to start before the May 4 vote, while simultaneously discounting the May 4 vote as insignificant and illegal. On a positive note, the government is backing, at least publicly, a series of ostensibly peaceful "national unity marches" May 4, instead of a heavy-handed crackdown by security forces or more provocative actions by social groups. Opposition leaders remain highly skeptical of government dialogue overtures. Meanwhile, the international community is piling on official and unofficial statements of concern (EU, CAN, Japan, Paraguay) and offers to help mediate (EU, CAN). Although international interest is welcome, it is highly unlikely any third party can move dialogue forward before May 4. In any event, it will take time to rebuild the trust between the two sides. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (U) OAS Political Secretary Dante Caputo returned to Bolivia for a nearly four-hour meeting with the opposition Department prefects (state governors) of Santa Cruz, Tarija, Beni, and Pando April 14. Following the meeting, Caputo said he did not envision a "magic" quick fix to the opposition/government political standoff. Caputo said there is a lack of "will, flexibility, and understanding of reality" to turn a "spirit of conversation" on both sides into a "concrete" dialogue. Caputo made similar statements following an April 15 meeting with President Evo Morales. Caputo also met with Foreign Minister Choquehuanca. Caputo previously visited Bolivia April 2 to lay the groundwork for

possible OAS facilitation/mediation between the opposition and government (ref a).

Opposition Steadfast: No Dialogue Before May 4

13. (U) Speaking on behalf of the prefects, Tarija Prefect Mario Cassio characterized the meeting as "positive" and affirmed the prefects' will to negotiate, but warned Bolivians to manage their expectations. "These are problems that have accumulated during many years and will not be resolved overnight." Cassio confirmed the prefects' refusal to suspend May-June autonomy referendums in their respective departments, starting with Santa Cruz Department's May 4 autonomy referendum, as a condition for negotiation. Cassio said prefects agreed with Caputo on three focus areas for future dialogue: national unity, democracy, and avoidance of violence. The opposition prefects and their department's civic committees issued a proclamation April 15 denouncing the government for fomenting a land redistribution confrontation in the Chaco region of Santa Cruz Department as means to distract and discredit the autonomy referendums.

14. (U) Jorge Tuto Quiroga, leader of the opposition PODEMOS party, bluntly discounted mediation by international organizations and neighboring countries and challenged their neutrality as "friends" of President Evo Morales. He repeated April 14 his position that any international mediation be coordinated with and subordinate to the efforts of the Catholic Church. (Note: The Catholic Church issued a statement last week saying the "situation is deteriorating dangerously" and the "radical sectors" were making a dialogue difficult. End Note.) Quiroga said international efforts in conjunction with Church efforts could be positive, but that the government had orchestrated visits by foreign delegations only to "validate government abuses."

15. (C) President of the Confederation of Businesses Gabriel Dabdoub, who is a leading figure in the Santa Cruz opposition, met with the Ambassador April 11. Dabdoub was highly critical of the Brazilian effort to help promote a dialogue, characterizing it as too biased towards the government. On the OAS effort, Dabdoub said the prefects would always meet to discuss ways to jump-start the dialogue because "we can ill afford to be seen as not wanting dialogue" -- that said, nothing can be expected to materialize before May 14. In fact, according to Dabdoub, the opposition sees the government's efforts to bring in international actors as a desperate attempt to prevent the referendum or delegitimize it. Dabdoub was vehement that the Santa Cruz referendum would go forward as scheduled, noting that no Cruceno politician could "stop the will" of the people at this point. He commented that the Santa Cruz leadership appreciated the Ambassador's "quiet" approach in recent weeks, particularly in the face of continued attacks by the Bolivian government. Dabdoub was critical of the government's duplicitous approach, pretending to want dialogue while taking actions like the cooking oil export ban, which he viewed as a purely political action aimed at crippling one prominent leader in the Santa Cruz opposition, who is in the cooking oil business.

16. (C) Opposition Congressman Peter Maldonado (UN-La Paz) told PolOff the Media Luna will pass autonomy referenda, it is now just a matter for the Bolivian government to decide "if it get's off of the tracks or wants to try and confront the train." He claimed government exploration of third-party negotiators was "for show" and a sign of their desperation. Echoing common opposition opinions, Maldonado did not rule out a future role for international mediators, but he discounted the current cast of possible facilitators as non-starters: the Church for perceived opposition "oligarchic" leaning, the OAS for perceived pro-government leaning, and neighboring states for both a pro-government bias and vested interests in Bolivian gas supplies. Out of concern the both government and opposition leaders were not proposing realistic options for dialogue, Maldonado and three other young opposition deputies proposed a long-term dialogue

among 19 government, prefect, and congressional leaders to hash out a compromise by the end of 2009, delaying prefect elections a year to coincide with federal elections in 2010.

Government Urgency for Pre-May 4 Dialogue

¶17. (U) Despite their recent attempts to hype the May 4's vote as "insignificant," government leaders seemed to contradictorily give it credence by insisting dialogue occur before the vote. "After the fourth we can't negotiate decisions already made. It will be complicated to make modifications afterwards," said Garcia Linera. Vice Minister of Government Coordination Hector Arce added that "it doesn't make sense to talk after the May 4 consultation." Arce also railed that Crucenos were being deceived to vote for autonomy statutes that only 15 percent of them are familiar with. (Note: Arce failed to mention that the same Captura and Consulting poll tracks 90 percent of Crucenos participating in the vote and 75 percent of Crucenos voting in favor of the referendum. End Note.)

¶18. (U) The government's strategy of the moment appears to be to downplay a hard-line by either official forces or government supporters to May 4 in favor of a kinder, gentler posture allowing the May 4 referendum to take place, while attacking its legality and legitimacy. Throughout the weekend, government officials from President Morales on down have discounted the significance of the referendum and called for national unity marches on May 4 in all nine department capitals to counter the Santa Cruz autonomy vote. Vice President Alvaro Garcia Linera characterized the referendum as a "very expensive poll" that the national government will ignore as illegal and unrecognized by the National Electoral Court.

EU, CAN Newest Members of International Mediation Hit Parade

¶19. (U) Adding to efforts already underway by the Catholic Church, OAS, and the nascent "friends group (refs)," the European Union and Andean Community offered to help mediate Bolivia's political crisis last week. CAN Secretary General Freddy Ehlers confirmed April 13 CAN's offer to help with "whatever action" is needed in support of international or church mediation efforts, following an April 11 CAN statement expressing concern for Bolivian's political situation and asking both sides to respect constitutional norms.

¶10. (U) The EU's April 11 statement welcomed Church and international efforts to "restore political dialogue," emphasized respect for institutions and rule of law, and urged "parties concerned" to take undefined steps "to defuse the current tension and enable a genuine national dialogue to be held, without preconditions." The statement further offered the EU to "help effect rapprochement" to reach an agreement on "constitutional reform and departmental autonomy." Local press stressed that, including many candidate and associate EU members, the statement represents 41 countries. FM Choquehuanca said publicly that he was considering inviting a EU delegation to mediate, but that such an invitation would depend on the outcome of a report from a combined Argentine/Brazilian/Colombian delegation visit April 3-5 exploring mediation options. Santa Cruz Civic Committee Vice President Luis Nunez rejected the EU statement and international declarations in general as outside interference, adding what the Civic Committee is concerned with "what the people of Santa Cruz have to say," not the EU.

Japan, Paraguay Join International Concern Crescendo

¶11. (C) On April 9, Japan issued a statement of concern regarding the political crisis, particularly the autonomy standoff in Santa Cruz, and urged both sides to resolve disputes through dialogue. (Comment: Although relatively tame in language, this is a significant development as Japan

rarely issues such statements. The statement reflects pronounced concern on the part of our contacts in the Japanese diplomatic corps for Japanese citizens and expatriates in Santa Cruz. End Comment.) Paraguayan Vice President Luis Alberto Castigliani chimed in his concern for the Bolivian political crisis April 13, adding a nod to the opposition's "legitimate" demands for autonomy.

Comment

¶12. (C) The recent flurry of international statements of concern and offers to mediate Bolivia's tense political stalemate are welcome, particularly from the EU, although these overtures would have been more useful much earlier on. In any event, no number of international delegations, whether OAS, EU, UN, or CAN, is going to stop the May 4 Santa Cruz referendum. As the OAS and opposition prefects stated, any negotiated dialogue will be a long-term affair. We remain skeptical that mediation can occur before May 4. The government seems more interested in maintaining the appearance of international legitimacy than in pursuing genuine dialogue. The government has implied tacit endorsement from visiting delegations, explaining their encouragement of the recent whirlwind of international actors. FM Choquehuanca made public that he had asked for statements from abroad, including the United States, a clear sign that the government hopes international concern will amount to pressure on the prefects to call off their autonomy referendums. A peculiar incident last week illustrates the point: Government officials took offhanded and unauthorized comments from Rodolfo Stavenhagen, a part-time relator for the UN Inspector of the Rights of Indigenous People, that the Santa Cruz referendum is unconstitutional, unilateral, and illegal as the official position of the UN and immediately cited these comments in their public campaign against the referendum. End Comment.
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